Remembering and Forgetting: The Construction and Maintenance of Cultural Memory

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Remembering and Forgetting:
The Construction and Maintenance of Cultural Memory

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The study of cultural memory, along with other memory research, has in the past tended to posit remembering and forgetting as oppositional forces in a mnemonic contestation over 'truth'. Whilst neither can be eventuated without the other, such an observation of memory has led to some rather reductionist assumptions of the dialectical relationship between the two as 'black and white' processes in constant conflict with one another. This passage utilises the relevant literature to explore the paradoxical nature of remembering and forgetting, highlighting the far more complex reality of the two in the cultural memory practices of societies and everyday life.

Keywords: cultural memory, remembering, forgetting, mnemonic practices, identity

1. Cultural Memory

Our human understandings of time, individual 'selfhood' and collective identity rely on our human faculty of memory (Assman, 2011a, 1995, 2008). Memory can be constructed, objectified, repressed and remembered on a multitude of levels, from the individual to the societal (Assmann, 2011a). Memory forms a connective bridge between the distant and recent past to the present (Assmann, 2008). This social and temporal connective tissue creates a sense of 'coherence' and a wealth of knowledge about the past, the present, and therefore, the future (Brockmeier, 2002). It allows us to conjure a picture or historical narrative of our past, which aids in the creation of our identity in the present in either an individual or collective sense (Assmann, 2011a). Cultural memory can be shaped through individual experiences and passed through oral traditions, it can be commemorated through official discourses and enshrined in the public sphere (Brockmeier, 2002), or it can be constructed and reconstructed through the interplay of individual, institutional and societal experience (Meusburger, 2011).

2. Remembering or Forgetting?

Whilst the concept of remembrance is, of course, integral to memory research, the role of the more shadowed and silenced notion of 'forgetting' is less clear (Connerton, 2008). Neither concept can essentially exist without the other, yet their antithetical status seemingly posits them as adversaries in a contest for the formation of cultural memory. To complicate matters further, Terdiman's (1993:250) supposition that "forgetting is a form of remembering" permits exciting conjecture to expand upon the already perplexing components of the paradox. The representations of the two concepts, with remembrance as the positive embracement of heritage and historical narrative, and forgetting as the repressive or silent erasure of our past and presents, has been highlighted by various authors (see for instance Connerton, 2008; Brockmeier, 2002; Plate, 2016; Stone and Hirst, 2014). Brockmeier (2002: 21) has jovially personified

disremembering as "the hostile villain Forgetting", with others remarking upon the anciency of the belief that forgetting is a form of 'failure' or is detrimental (Connerton, 2008), through the ancient Greek concept of Lethe as "oblivion, forgetfulness and concealment" (Plate, 2016:145). Conversely, the excerpt from Plate (2016:143) below encapsulates the general agreement amongst academics that remembering serves the opposite purpose, as the 'valiant protector' of history:

> *'…acts of memory seek to counter the effects of forgetting: they serve the imperative to remember and impede the work of forgetting.'*

Academic discourse surrounding remembering and forgetting does not lack contestation. However, with some proposing that we live in an era which encourages forgetting for a multitude of reasons, such as peace and development, and others arguing that we in fact are constantly surrounded and harassed by celebrations of past and living memory (Singer and Conway, 2012; Misztal, 2010; Berliner, 2005). Wessell and Moulds (2008:288) pinpoint a main reasoning for interdisciplinary unrest between facets of remembering and disremembering as differences in application and terminology, with psychology prescribing mechanisms and processes to memory studies, and the social sciences focusing more on classifications. The paradoxical nature of remembrance and forgetting has, in the last few decades, become a fascinating quandary not just of interdisciplinary concern but of contemporary society (Misztal, 2010:25). The last several months for instance have seen pivotal breakthroughs be made in the study of memory formation and storage (Berry et al, 2018), and through the mass media and public discourse we are reminded to partake in a range of mnemonic practices, from commemorating the anniversaries of civil rights events to memorialising deceased persons of interest. Common public and media conversations around elements of 'forgetting' however typically connotes topics with much more sombre overtones, such as the often-stigmatised discourses surrounding degenerative disorders like Dementia (McInerney, 2017).

3. The Role of Remembering

In terms of remembering, Brockmeier (2002) asserts that Western societies are 'commemoration cultures', and hypothesises further that Western obsessions in 'remembering' the past serve not only to align and bind cultural identities, but to act as a 'comfort blanket' of stability and chronology in a globalising, capitalist ideological existence of constant change (Ibid). Singer and Conway (2008: 282) postulate that cultural memory is in some sense constructed much in the same way as individual memory:

> *'...just as individuals re-organize their priorities and place emphasis on different aspects of their lives through the photographs and letters they save and the stories that they tell, cultures too make selections through textbooks, celebrations and educational curricula.'*

Other cultural memory researchers relegate the links between individual and cultural memory through a differing structural formation, proposing that culture is the social environment and value system which mediates and shapes what we remember and how such memory is utilised daily (Brockmeier, 2002: Ross and Wang, 2010: Wang and Ross, 2005). Remembering of course occurs in a multitude of ways. The archivisation of history through texts and through museums, national holidays and celebrations of past events, the erection of tangible heritage through monuments and architectural reminders of history,

generational story-telling and individual conversations, and the objectification of cultural memory through the arts, media and education are all examples of the ways in which we memorialise or are periodically reminded of mnemonic events from our past and living histories, in both our physical and emotional environments (Foote, 1990; Singer and Conway, 2008). At a phenomenological level, psychology might investigate how data we retain becomes stored as long-term rather than short-term memory, and the cognitive, behavioural and emotional factors of memory formation in its multi-faceted existences (Bradley and Baddeley, 1990; Bluck, 2003). A common example of situational remembrance you may hear in the USA for example is some form of the question; "where were you when the 9/11 attacks happened?". Whilst such a question may seem to be a temporally objective mnemonic exercise, it is often in fact the precursor to an answer subconsciously laden with interrelated components of trauma, identity, nationalism, governmental and institutional representations of the attack (Fivush, 2010; Haskin and DeRose, 2003), and a whole host of other factors not including the tendency for substantial human error where memory is concerned (Fivush, 2010), and therefore of course what is not remembered (Legg, 2007).

4. The Elements and Functions of Forgetting

As with remembering then, it is misguided to discuss forgetting without dissecting the various ways it materialises and the functions it plays in various societal and individual settings. In Connerton's (2008) account of seven types of forgetting, Singer and Conway (2008) note that he characterises forgetting, through a socio-political lens, as an active rather than passive process. Connerton (2008) however does not suggest that forgetting is always a repressive or purposeful erasure of memory. Whilst such tactics may be employed by totalitarian governments (for instance through the strict control of memory and the evisceration of counter-memory that does not align with the chosen state narrative (Assmann, 2011), forgetting is far more complex and serves an array of purposes, occurring in divergent social settings and appearing under the guise of many standards of human behaviour (Connerton, 2008; Stone et al, 2012). Forgetting, for instance, could be observed through psychological analyses as adaptive, in either 'making space' for higher priority information that requires retention (Erdelyi, 2008), or as a defence mechanism (albeit a contested one) (Bradley and Baddeley, 1990), as the exiling of painful memory which causes significant harm to the individual (Erdelyi, 2008). Through the Bartlettian observation of forgetting, one which is supported by an array of psychological literature, forgetting may often simply be the passive process of misremembering certain memories at a frequency that leads to the originally stored data no longer existing in its 'authentic' form (Ibid).

When forgetting is approached through the sphere of the social sciences, its patterns and constructions alter yet again, although certain elements converge readily with psychological literature on the subject (Erdelyi, 2008). Whilst Connerton's magnification of 'seven types of forgetting' sparked a wealth of critique and hasty reply from social and psychological academics alike (see for instance Singer and Conway, 2008; Erdelyi, 2008; Wessel and Moulds, 2008), his formulations are deeply insightful for the exploration of mnemonic practices in the social and political spheres. Examples of Connerton's (2008) types of forgetting include:

• *Repressive erasure* - Forgetting in its 'most brutal form', typically state or institutionally enforced and involves the condemnation and/or silencing of mnemonic practices

• *Forgetting as humiliated silence* - The covert and unacknowledged societal silencing of memory which typically follows extreme conflict, comparable to a 'societal coping mechanism' of avoidance of shame and trauma.

A similar conceptualisation to the latter was formulated by Stone et al (2012), in the form of 'mnemonic silence', which was utilised initially in terms of individual interaction, but has since been extended by the authors to denote the impact of public silence in collective memory construction and maintenance (Stone and Hirst, 2014). Singer and Conway (2008) however temper the discourse of forgetting as 'disposed of' information, by shifting the focus to forgetting as the reassignment of symbolic and prioritised meaning as time, space and culture alters around us.Their theorisation of memory and of forgetting brings to the forefront the perceptive argument that forgetting is not the violent or passive redaction of cultural memory, but a consequence of shifts in societal or individual attention and values (Singer and Conway, 2008).

5. Revising Remembering and Forgetting as paradoxical in nature

Both remembering and forgetting are induced and interpreted through the processes of the other, and neither can be reduced to a unidirectional and singular objective of temporal ownership. The consequences of constructive remembering and forgetting are grappled with globally; through the commemoration of the Omagh bombing (Johnson, 2011), in the principles of the Truth and Justice Commission of post-Apartheid South-Africa (Paez and Lui, 2010), via the valorisation of the dead of WWI and the concealment of the disfigured men who returned (Connerton, 2008), and through the living memories of those who experienced horrific violence during the Soviet period (Etkind, 2009). Each example involves its own individual mnemonic interactions that were, and still are, demonstrative of the cultural, spatial and historical context in which they were situated, and are managed and reinterpreted daily by individuals, communities and nation-states.

Memory is a multi-dimensional phenomenon (Erdelyi, 2008). Remembering and forgetting are deeply contextual and complex processes, and are not heroes and villains in an eternal fight to claim memory and 'truth'. To expand upon this, memory should not be understood as an objective and 'authentic' collection of mnemonic histories. Memory is in many cases constructed, and it is often the social or cultural power of the constructor that shapes its future in how it is enshrined, erased, objectified or consistently reconstructed (Stone et al, 2017; Meusburger, 2011; Connerton, 2008). Whilst the paradoxical statement that 'what is not remembered is as critical to forming [an] identity as what is remembered' (Stone and Hirst, 2014:315) still stands, then it is also true that remembering and forgetting are not light and shadows on the tapestry of memory, but a spectral mosaic that is richer than the binaries of passive and active, malignant and benign, enforced and conceded, and objective and constructionist (Legg, 2007).

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